

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Ten

Lew Speegle Stops Fooling Them

BEST THING about my father-in-law was that he always trusted me. Right after my wife and I were married and moved out to California, he confided in me. "Now, Lew, I'd like to buy a house. Maybe spend about ten thousand, maybe a little less. I want you to look around for me and see if you can find just the right one. Remember, I can go as high as ten thousand."

I hunted around until I had just the right house for him. I knew he was fussy.

"The very best I could do was ten thousand, five hundred," I told him. "If you can't go the extra, maybe I can help you."

"Don't worry, Lew," he said. "I can swing it, I think. It's such a nice little house. Thank you, Son."

After I helped him move, being very careful not to scratch his favorite easy chair, I took his check, cashed it and paid the owner his eight thousand five hundred. Then I counted my change - about two thousand dollars - and pocketed it.

I never did get around to telling my wife all the details of how I got her father his house. Maybe it was just as well she never found out about it. Because from then on, deals seemed to come natural to me, and there was something in that wife of mine that didn't like spending money that wasn't perfectly straight.

One day, she really got provoked. "We're through," she said to me. "This is all I can take."

I never was much good at reasoning with a woman.

"Look," I said. "What's the difference if I pulled the wool over Old Lady Cavin's eyes on that school site deal? She's happy about it. Things are fine. 'You're an upstanding young man,' she told me. Kissed me on the forehead before I left like I was her own son. And furthermore," I told my wife. "I notice you're perfectly willing to spend the money as long as you don't know how I make it. Oh, Honey, can't you see-"

But she never heard the rest of my story. "I'm through with you, Lew Speegle," she said. "I'm not only through spending your crooked money, I'm through with you. I'm taking the baby and you're getting out."

It must have been about then I started traveling. You really see the world when you're with a carnival. There's money in it, too.

I tried the navy for a while, but I couldn't stand the pay long.

I was front man for a couple of men who ran a little sideline with dice and cards. There's good money in that, too, and after a while, you get used to the characters who come in to play the games.

Like that old German fellow that wandered into the casino where I was working back before the first world war. He was a character all right, a real lover of music with a fond hope of sending a young violinist to Europe. He kept playing some phonograph record over and over that night. "Berceuse from Jocelyn."

In between records, he'd tell me about the young man he was going to send over to Germany to study. He was going to finance the lad with the money he'd been saving for twelve years. He had twenty-two hundred and he came to the casino to turn it into five thousand, all for the young musician!

We played all evening. He was a character, but I have to admit the old fellow was big about losing all his cash.

"I've worked twelve years to save it, but I-I always pride myself on being a good loser," he told me, "so we'll shake hands."

I walked around to his side of the game table and put my arms around him. "More than shake hands, Professor. I have to come over and put my arms around you. You remind me of my dear old grandfather." That was how I got hold of the old fellow's watch in his pocket.

I made London my next stop and booked up with Madame Bernice Deploya, a short, plump East Indian "clairvoyant and mystic" from the Bronx. Like I said before, I never was much good at reasoning with women. She and I had most of our trouble over watches and stickpins I lifted from the clientele.

When I was through with that job, I left for New York City and finally Chicago in 1924. My particular trade was a little slow that year, but I heard that street corner hawking was good on Skid Row. This seemed a little beneath me, I thought at first, but I became used to the atmosphere when I found out how much you could make with "genuine African diamonds" at ten

cents a piece.

I sold a lot of genuine all metal bird whistles, too. Of course, I had a very glib, convincing talk. "Here you are, gentlemen, just the combination of two beautiful gifts to take home to the little woman and that sweet little child. For just one dime, one tenth of a dollar, you can keep your wife, or get her back again, with this genuine African clear-cut diamond ring. Genuine all-metal whistling birds, too, to delight the kiddies' hearts and make their eyes shine. Let the little woman know you're a real father."

Then one night some happy "songbirds" drowned out my "line." They were singing on the gospel wagon belonging to the Pacific Garden Mission down the street. I lost all my customers to the wagon and there was nothing to do but make a move to the next block. I folded up my portable jewelry kit, packed my metal birds and then-sat down on the curb and listened to their songs.

There was a clogged-up, choked feeling in my throat as I listened to the singing. Lew Speegle with a lump in his throat? "You need a change, Lew," I told myself. So I made straight for Mexico City the next day. I went south by train - freight train.

Sharing the same car with me there was a fellow who had figured an interesting angle.

"Aincha gonna get no shut-eye, pal? It's gettin' on for midnight," he remarked.

I tried to go around that by saying I had something on my mind, didn't feel like sleeping.

"You worried?"

"Yeah, guess so," I admitted.

I started to hum. It sounded like a hymn. Then I began to say words, "JESUS-Saviour-pilot-me." My singing trailed off into the darkness of the rattling freight.

"You got JESUS worries," he said quietly.

I thought he wasn't just all right. I told him so.

"No," he told me. "I been ridin' these rods for near forty years. I know JESUS worries when I see them. Ain't had none myself, but I've rode with many guys heavy with them. Seems like I'd start wondering about JESUS one of these days myself."

I didn't get that slant. "You believe in JESUS?" I asked him.

"Don't rightly know. Reckon I do. Seen Him trouble so many men. Like He's troubling you right now."

"Who says it's GOD I'm so worried about?" Maybe it's my wife and baby I haven't seen for fifteen years."

"They say it all goes together. When a guy gets JESUS worries he sees himself as the skunk he

is. That's what seems to happen to every guy I ride with who's got JESUS worries."

Somehow, the lights in Mexico City looked a little tarnished on that trip. The tavern women all looked alike to me so I rode the "rods" right back to Chicago.

Soon as I was back in the city, I made for Skid Row.

But this time I wasn't selling a thing. I was on the receiving end.

My first night back, the old gospel wagon rattled down the street. The men were singing "JESUS-Saviour-pilot-me," and I stepped out to the edge of the curb. I began to sing with them, strange as that may seem.

The man on the freight train was wrong. I didn't have JESUS worries. Not Lew Speegle. Not any more, anyhow. I had JESUS.

But even after I became a Christian, I couldn't stay out of the selling field very long. When a man is used to convincing people, you can't break him of the habit. So I reported to the Pacific Garden Mission and booked up with the gospel wagon. I started telling about salvation from sin, and about JESUS!

Spare evenings I wrote many letters to all the people I'd swindled. Nineteen letters I stuffed into the mailbox in one night. The longest one was addressed to the U. S. Navy, regarding desertion of one Lew Speegle.

Shortly thereafter, I departed from the Pacific Garden Mission for jail. First the navy took me to a North Chicago jail, then to one in Washington.

When my trial came up in Washington, I gave the officers the whole story from the beginning, desertion to the ending, JESUS.

When I was through talking, several officers went into a huddle in the courtroom. The general officer in charge asked me if I knew what the desertion penalty was.

Of course I did. "My citizenship may be taken away and I can be sent to Leavenworth, Sir," I answered, full of sincere respect.

The officers crossed the room in a hurry. "Speegle," they stated, "in view of the-uh-miraculous change in your life, we are sentencing you to serve out your enlisted term aboard a government vessel. Then you're a free man."

They meant it too. I began serving my term, and before it was half over, I had my honorable discharge.

Then I went home to my wife and boy. "Sure, I still love you, Lew," my wife said. "Now that you've stopped fooling everybody, including yourself."

~ end of chapter 10 ~